

SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND ECOLOGIC BENEFITS OF SMALL SKI RESORTS: A LOCAL RESILIENCE MODEL FOR THE ALPS?

Martha Gärber¹, Sara Casagrande Bacchiocchi², Susanne Elsen¹, Giulia Cavrini¹, Stefan Zerbe².

¹Faculty of Education, Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Italy.

²Faculty of Science and Technology, Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Italy.

ABSTRACT: South Tyrol (Northern Italy) has a strong cultural identity due to the cultural history, the border situation, a gross domestic product depending largely on tourism and a remarkable lively countryside. It seems that the local small ski resorts play an important role in promoting an alternative and authentic way of life. Moreover, they offer flexible working possibilities and serve multifunctional recreational purposes with an important social and educational function in peripheral areas exposed to rural depopulation. They are especially important for the formation of young talents in winter sports. South Tyrol has 38 small and very small ski resorts of a mere local dimension. They actively involve an important number of locals (also volunteers) and maintain an economic circuit and a community-based life style in remote and peripheral regions. Small ski areas have a special attraction to a specific segment of tourists, especially families with young children and elder people. The study focuses on the question: What future can they have in a rapidly changing socio-economic environment and in facing climate change conditions? Are they sustainable in an ecological, economic and social perspective? What benefits can these local ski resorts offer for the communities?

KEYWORDS: local community building, young talents, regional development, remote regions, sustainability.

1. INTRODUCTION

In South Tyrol, tourism plays a central role and the service sector responds to more than 70 % of the Gross Domestic Product, with more than three million guest arrivals (on about 550.000 inhabitants) in the winter season 2017/2018 (Landesinstitut für Statistik, 2018). The first snow sport pioneers started in the early 1950ies with first investments in winter tourism infrastructure such as, e.g. ropeways. In the last 1970ies and 80ies, all ski-based players had increasingly to face snow management problems and in the late 1980ies, the first investments in technical snow were made on a large scale. In the following years, there was a significant polarization between those who remained small and concentrated primarily on the local population and those, who changed to an industrial ski-sports management. The latter managed the transition with considerable investments and growing extensions of the winter sport area by creating medium- and large-sized ski resorts able to offer often more than 50 km of slopes together with modern infrastructure. Those who could not

cope with this development became increasingly less central and many of the small pioneer ropeways and so-called “Dorflifte”, (“Bürgermeisterlifte” in Austria) disappeared in South Tyrol, too (Landesinstitut für Statistik, 2016). The remaining ones had more and more difficulties. Thus in 2012, the local government decided to offer an important investment support to small ski resorts and local ropeways. Indeed, most of the small skiing areas took advantage of the possibility and invested largely in technical equipment. In doing this, the small ski resorts have to come up with heavy investments that have a strong economic impact. Moreover, they are influenced by the standards, which big players set in ski tourism.

The study aims to examine what benefits are due to these local ski resorts in terms of local community development and local economies (circular economy) as well as their role in a view of sustainable development of remote regions facing climate change challenges.

The central questions are:

*Corresponding author address:

Martha Gärber, Faculty of Education,
Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, 39100 Bolzano, Italy;
tel: +39 348 56 23 906
email: Martha.gaerber@education.unibz.it

- Do small ski resorts have a future?
- Are they sustainable in an ecological, economic and social perspective?
- Are they worth to be supported by the public authorities?
- Do local ski resorts have an impact on the maintenance of vital local communities and in preventing depopulation of remote rural areas?

The small ski resorts and local ropeways are results of the activities of the “founding generation” or of the ski-pioneers from the middle of the last century on. While the big structures followed the economic growth dynamics, these small realities represent diverse objectives and organizational models. According to Latouche (2015, p. 25), we can say that they represent an “A-growth” model in the sense that these structures maintained their small-scale size. They are embedded in their communities and can be recognized as focus of local wealth-creating circuits.

These community-embedded structures normally involve a broad range of relevant local actors such as volunteers, farmers, and retired people in part time jobs, associations, hut-, hotel- and bar-keepers, ski-teachers etc. and they follow various objectives. It is not at all monetary interests only, but the motivation, to keep this common structure as a focal point in the community that builds the background of these commonly managed structures (Fig.1).

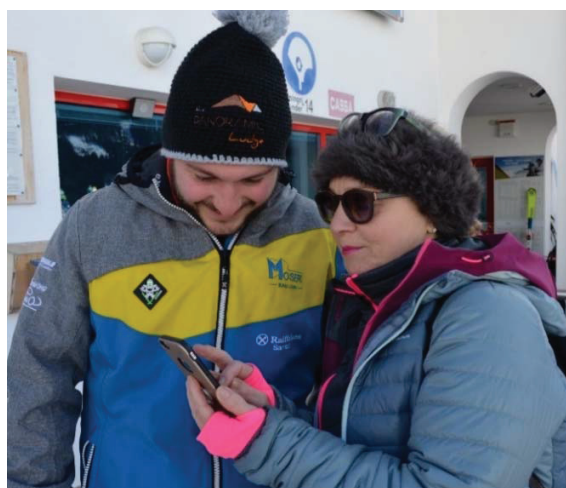


Figure 2: Technical employee exchanging social life experience with film reporter Beatrix Unterhofer, Reinswald, 2018. Foto: Martha Gärber.

Small ski resorts and local ropeways seem to support community building elements and foster eco-social self-organization (Elsen, 2011). Finally yet importantly, these small ski resorts seem to be a specific local resilience model following the definition of Folke (2016).

2. METHODS

In our study, we collected quantitative and qualitative data from local ski resorts and ropeways of South Tyrol during the winter seasons 2016/17 and 2017/18, which in total amount for 38 (Autonome Provinz Bozen Südtirol, 2017). In a comprehensive questionnaire, we focused on economic, social and ecological information.

In about half (15) of all small ski resorts or local ropeways, side inspections and face-to-face data collection took place. In 10 cases, data was collected by phone interviews and 10 questionnaires were returned without personal contact.

The interviews concerned selected stakeholders, mainly the presidents of the local ski resorts and their technical employees. The information coming especially from the latter was collected by addressing to them in their original language, which is a German dialect. Repeated expressions and thoughts were then clustered (Fig. 2).



Figure 1: Side inspection with interview and filming on the "Rittner Horn", 2018. Foto: Martha Gärber.

3. PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The maintenance of vital local ski resorts with functioning local ropeways depends largely on voluntary work and the enthusiasm and dedication of local relevant actors. These key actors are able to design a local community

model, which attracts children and grandparents as well as young families and elder people. The infrastructures serve primarily the local inhabitants. The inhabitants of remote villages have a strong emotional attachment to these infrastructures, which in most cases are part of the community memory and common emotional experiences in the third generation.

Locals and tourists seem to look for a safe place where to spend some pleasant and calm hours in the fresh air by having fun and relaxing without long travel distances and paying a reasonable price. The offer seems to be sufficient for them. Safety elements and a secure and over viewable environment as well as a quick reachability are mentioned frequently. (Fig. 3).

Working in the fresh air, a nearby working place, the possibility to get into contact and



Figure 4: Young child with skiing teacher, Guggenberg, 2018. Foto: Martha Gärber

communication with different people as well as the possibility to get in touch with attractive technical equipment seems to fulfill the needs of the employees (none of the small ski resorts have a relevant turnover of personal).

The majority of the employees have an agricultural background, whilst most of the responsible are in some way involved in the tourism business.

The impact on the local economy is relevant (more than 600 employees) and important in terms of maintaining a vital local economy and offering attractive working possibilities for people

living in remote regions. The accessible prices are attractive to a special segment of tourists and for families with small children or elder skiers.

All local ski resorts and ropeways have a relatively short season (Fig. 4), which is concentrated in the central winter months. This has a positive influence on their cost management. Local ski resorts and even more local ropeways are able to manage their opening hours in a surprisingly flexible way. Their incidence in energy and water consumption is marginal, in several cases water and energy are easily available.



Figure 3: Short distances, short seasons, Ternten, 2017. Foto: Martha Gärber

The challenges due to climate change have been handled in most cases by investing in technical snow infrastructure. Often the location of the infrastructure is ideal in terms of sun exposure. In the past, ski pioneers often chose cold and sun protected areas when they first established the recreational zones from the middle of the last century onwards.

The vegetation data indicate that ski management practices affect grassland vegetation, but the effects in the small ski areas are more restrained respect to the medium-size ski area, due to the more limited use of the artificial snow in a shorter ski season (Casagrande, 2018).

A large part of the region's young talents is coming from local ski resorts. Most of the small ski resorts show special attention towards vulnerable social groups. Enhancing both a transdisciplinary and transformative study approach, the profile of the local players was sharpened and the self-confidence increased.

Concerning the transdisciplinary character, the study process involved on several moments

scientific experts from the faculty of Education (Prof. Dr. S. Elsen and Prof. Dr. G. Cavrini) and Natural sciences (Prof. Dr. Stefan Zerbe) of the Free University of Bolzano/Bozen. Further, also the main representatives of the local ski resorts of South Tyrol and some of their technical employees and majors of the remote villages took an active part in the study. Moreover, the process involved the Office for ropeways, the Office for special planning and the Department of Economy of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano/Bozen. In the workshops participated also representatives of the local ski association and the local Institution for touristic destination management IDM. (See also considerations on interdisciplinary by Andrew, B. et al., 2008 and Jahn T. et al., 2012, as well as the approach of Strasser U. et al., 2014).

As per the transformative approach, it can be pointed out that both workshops together with the long meetings in occasion of the interviews and side inspection offered important occasions to reflect about possible development scenarios of small ski resorts. The open collaboration between the actors and the free exchange of ideas were determining the research process. Finally, we could reflect on climate change effects with Glaciologist Prof. Dr. Georg Kaser (University of Innsbruck).

Because of the transformative process, the option that sufficiency can be an aim entered the development scenarios. Growth and merging perspectives gathered a different incidence in the discussion about the future of these areas. Relevant representatives of the group of small ski areas and local ropeways are planning to organize a special focus group in order to channel the answers towards external players (associations, local politics and destination management institutions). The network between the responsible players got stronger and they had several possibilities to get into contact among them.

The attention of the local politics is still and increasingly high.

The regional ropeway association dedicates special attention to the small resorts. A film reportage about the stories and realities of small ski resorts and local ropeways has been committed; the main sponsor is the regional ropeway association.

Specific interests in the results of the study come from Austria, Switzerland and Central Italy.

4. FUTURE WORK

A comparison of isolation prevention policies and resilient answers to climate change challenges in Finland's small ski resorts will be carried out. Reflecting on the transformative and transdisciplinary character of our research.

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